



The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



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MAY 2011

WEATHER IN *transition*



AROUND this time last year we were writing about “the dry Dry Season”, and all the fires that were ravaging the hills of our Northern Range. Back then fires could be seen from around the Simla area all the way to the southern end of the Arima Valley and beyond. Here at Spring Hill, most of our springs were drying up, and one had to actually walk along the stream beds to hear the chirping of the ubiquitous little frogs to which we had become so accustomed.



But by August last year, we could write in the *BellBird* about the return of “Rainy Mountain Days”, and of the sounds of the streams and of the frogs and birds returning to serenade us. But it took much longer for the fruit to return to the trees, and for the forests generally to recover from the drought.

This year we have had a far more benign dry season, with sporadic, and sometimes heavy rains, every month so far. These rains have kept the Northern Range, and particularly our Arima valley, lush and green. The magnificent flowering trees all presented their colours on schedule. First the vermilion Immortelles, then the yellow Pouis, and already we are seeing the brilliant red *Conchocarpus*, the country’s National Flower brightening the roads and trails.

On an early morning walk (just before sunrise!) along the driveway, you can hear a deep humming from high above certain trees. This comes from the thousands of bees feeding on the flowers of the Hog Plum trees, the trees so covered in blossoms that the bees seem to making up for last year’s dearth of blossoms, and subsequently of fruit.

Does Nature send us a benign spell of weather to compensate for a harsh season experienced? Maybe you should come to Asa Wright to find the answer!

GOLDEN-HEADED MANAKIN

(*Pipra erythrocephala*)



ONE of the main attractions on our Discovery Trail is the lek of the Golden-headed Manakins. This lek, an area amid our many acres of forest, is a spot where one can witness moves reminiscent of the late Michael Jackson’s moon walk. After observing a group of male Manakins dancing on tree branches you may find yourself unsure of the original inventor of such a dance. Yes, Manakins are birds famous for highly crafted courtship displays and Golden-headed Manakins, for their mimicry of these backward steps. Display is saved only for the female, who ultimately mates with the bird that shows the greatest skill in “dancing”.

Golden-headed Manakins sport brilliantly golden heads atop their black bodies. Their thighs are white with red on the lower edges. Females, however, are a less radiant olive green while both sexes have pink legs. These birds are diminutive ones; only about 3.5 inches long. Apparently, the male calls to announce an impending display, repeating a short “pu” and increasing the tempo until it lands on the branch where it will begin to moon-walk.

These feisty birds are fond of Melastomaceae berries but will also eat beetles, caterpillars and other insects. They breed from January to August, immediately after which they moult until November. They make cup-shaped nests, which they hang between twigs, above ground. Like the heads of the males, the eggs are yellow, although it is a very light yellow with spots and brown lines at the broader end. It is also fascinating to note that only the female incubates these eggs.

On your next visit to the Asa Wright Nature Centre, a guided tour will provide you with the opportunity to see these birds in their natural habitat. Wouldn’t you like to witness these special displays?

– J.L. Ryan

References:

ffrench, Richard. 1991. *A Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*.



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Wake the Dead!

WE are not talking here about raiding a cemetery or anything so bizarre! We are simply announcing the return of our “Mountain Ebony” Robusta coffee to our guests and, more importantly to our gift shop at the Centre.

As aficionados know, the coffee which we serve here and sell from the gift shop is grown in the forest at Spring Hill. It is picked by our staff, dried in our sunshine and then roasted and ground on the estate. So the coffee never leaves the Valley

until you take a bag of Mountain Ebony home with you.

Last year, with the severe drought we experienced, we had very little coffee to harvest, and although we served it at meals and on the verandah, we were unable to sell the packaged coffee from the gift shop.

But now it is back on our shelves! Good, strong coffee, strong enough to “Wake the Dead!” which is the tagline created by our sponsors Lonsdale Saatchi & Saatchi, to market the product. Meet the little night characters who depict the Mountain Ebony coffee of Asa Wright. These



loveable little night creatures helped LS&S to win a Gold ADDY® Award in the Caribbean Advertising Federation Awards.



VISIT US TO SEE **29** SPECIES OF NOCTURNAL BATS.



VISIT US TO SEE **SCORES** OF NOCTURNAL TREE FROGS.



VISIT US TO SEE **159** SPECIES OF BIRDS, INCLUDING THE NOCTURNAL BARN OWL.

WHILE YOU'RE HERE, HAVE A CUP OR SIX OF OUR EYE-OPENINGLY DELICIOUS HOUSE-BLEND COFFEE.